RESEARCH REPORT

The Nomad, Space and Network of the Silk Roads

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> Just as we separate in space, we fix in time. The intellect is not made to think *evolution*, in the proper sense of the word—that is to say, the continuity of a change that is pure mobility.
>
> Henri Bergson (1998: 163)

Introduction

Taking the age-old trade routes known as the 'silk road' as a figuration of thinking, this paper revolves around the question, what is space, if not just a three-dimensional container of activities? And what is time, if not a spatialized linear construct and a dimension added to space?

In this paper, I set out to examine space as connection, as subject and means of distribution in light of networks. The transhistorical approach and meta-level critique of space looks both to spaces in the concrete as well as spaces in the process of being actualized, especially through movement and network. I will draw on selected works from my curatorial project 'Transgression, Syncretism' (March 2016, Asia Culture Center Theater, South Korea) as a case study to substantiate the theoretical thinking.
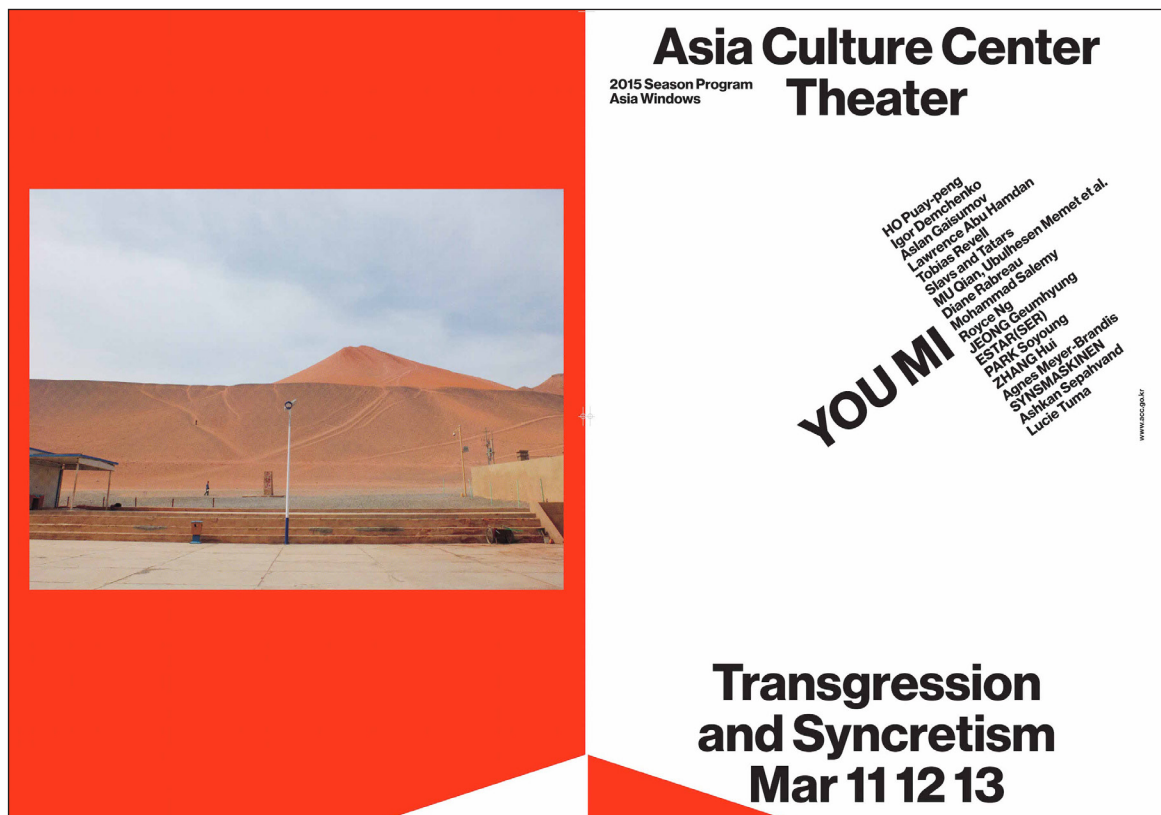

Figure 1: Poster of *Transgression, Syncretism* as part of Asia Culture Center Theater season program. Courtesy Asia Culture Center Theater.

'Transgression, Syncretism' is a three-day program of a series of performatively interwoven lectures, screenings and performances that takes the many different silk roads as its starting point. 'Silk road' is for me as much a series of historical trade routes connecting East Asia and Europe through Greater Central Asia, as a contemporary political-economical trope for infrastructural projects; as much lived realities of interconnected cultural spaces, and as imagined quasi-entity whose coinage – first popularized in German 'Seidenstrasse' – coincides with European imperialism. The aim is not to go back to any romanticized original state but to ask, in what way can the transgressive potential once seen in history find a contemporary incarnation?

The program deliberately stacks heterogeneous layers of time-spaces on top of each other. One way of interweaving them is through a network analysis of space – treating space as enabling connections and disconnections of various kinds, so that at the local level one can speak of the social and at a global level, of abstract historical movements, yet without the latter being devoid of the real, lived and practiced reality. Furthermore, each layer harbors tendencies of its own institutionalizing or decomposing, as conditions of politics in the particular context.

Connectivity and Disconnectivity

At various spots on the rim of the Taklamakan Desert in Chinese Central Asia, archaeologists have discovered old documents that hold information about those who traversed the area – often recording merchants, the animals with which they travelled and their itineraries – dating to medieval times (Hansen 2012). Some of these documents are tax records detailing how much of what goods were transported to and from China during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). What people have as a romantic image of the ancient Silk Road – a network of prosperous trade routes with caravans and camels bearing heaps of goods – is contrasted with a scandalously small volume of trade reported in these recovered records, at least at this key nodal point to the heartland of China. Only a few of the records suggest a noteworthy surge of the silk trade, concentrated in the years when the Tang court placed garrison cities in Central Asia, which seems to suggest that governmental wages stimulated trade on some of the routes of the time. The actual insignificant amount of trade, contrary to popular notion, makes the other aspect of the silk road more manifest, namely the flux of ideas, artistic forms and styles of life, which resulted in the most syncretic visual, cultural, linguistic and religious practices still visible today. In this light, the program of 'Transgression, Syncretism' starts with a lecture by art historian Puay-peng Ho on historical connectivity and cultural transfers seen in the syncretic styles of Buddhist wall paintings in grottos dotted in Central Asia.

On the meta-level, we have an original image of network: for most of the time in recorded history, the various routes connecting nodal towns and cities could be said to form a great distributed network, fueled by interactions of people and knowledge along with transactions of goods. The old silk road network was a distributed network as no absolute center could be identified (even Tang governmental spending in Central Asia only effected regional inflation while for the rest it was business as usual). The artistic, cultural, religious and linguistic dynamics – syncretic in any given time in history but also mutating, evolving or obliterating in time – further attest to the multiformity of networks. Galloway and Thacker (2007: 60) see this as a question of 'a formal arrangement, not a finite count', based on which 'networks are reconfigurable in new ways'.

The 20th century has witnessed dramatic changes to the face of Central Asia, when it was confronted with nationalistic regimes and nationalism-based imperialism. This is reflected in the newly created borders of the tangible and ideological kind, and at the same, the reconfiguration of local network structure. For example, borders were initially drawn based on the type of economy in Soviet Central Asia in the 1920s: Uzbekistan – sedentary agriculture of the plains; Tajikistan – sedentary agriculture of mountain valleys; Kazakhstan – nomadic agriculture of the steppes; Kyrgyzstan – nomadic agriculture of the mountains; and Turkmenistan – agriculture of the very dry steppes and the desert. Since then the once shared local network has been complicated by border regimes. The 'Transgression, Syncretism' program highlights the rationalism-backed nationalism at play in heritage politics in Soviet Central Asia, with a lecture by art historian Igor Demchenko, and the fantastical construction of 'Chechen' identity in post-Chechen-war Grozny with a film by artist Aslan Gaisumov.

Capitalistic Reconfiguration of the Network

Taking a leap from the old trade route to observe the development of capitalism, we see how the reconfiguration of network takes on new dimensions: the enlisting of labor and natural resources on a global scale, the incorporation of cognitive production and consumption, coupled with the subsumption

Figure 2: Royce Ng, *Kishi the Vampire*, lecture performance. Credits: Lai Huihui.

of politics, to the point that invisible networks of capitalistic global governance seize everyone through its machinery of knowledge production and desire modulation even before one's cognitive registration. The program attempts to unpack this capitalistic network from specific localities.

In a new commission, Royce Ng presents *Kishi the Vampire,* a lecture performance on the little discussed history of the East Asian capitalistic system. It was already foreseen and exercised by the Japanese politician Nobusuke Kishi during WWII. His syncretic economic philosophy is characterized by a refashioning of German style technical specialization, American style Taylorist assembly lines and Soviet Style central planning. Ng has produced a grotesque projected animation portraying Kishi as a vampire, and appears on stage in a Japanese silk kimono produced in the late 1930s depicting the Japanese occupied Manchuria and Korea, where Kishi implemented his policies.

The postwar remaking of Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia, even China at a much later time point, can all be attributed to his ideas. This chapter shows the mutation of the global capitalistic world as early as in the 1930s, which goes beyond any easy dichotomy between West and East, center and periphery.

To paint an extreme picture of the transnational financial system to come, speculative designer Tobias Revell was commissioned to make a lecture performance based on his installation work *88.7, Stories From the First Transnational Traders.*

The story centers on an ex-Soviet Arktika class icebreaker, recommissioned to act as an experiment in global finance at 88.7 degrees latitude – the heart of the arctic sea. There it could circumnavigate the world in twenty-four hours, allowing it to stay in constant contact with trading zones throughout the world. Revell aptly threads together geopolitical and biopolitical events including the dissolution of the European Union into a transnational business entity, the rise of the uniquely North Korean economic solution and the regime's favoring homogeny over individualism, as well as the research of corporate geneticists hoping to gain insight into the melding of biological man and market through the transformation of transnational traders.

Nomad and Networks, Updated

A central figuration that arises from the geographical spaces of the Central Asia is the historical nomad, which allows us to continue our inquiry into networks and space. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the nomad is characterized – paradoxically – not necessarily by physical movement but by an abstract relation to space. For the nomads, space is not distributed to man, but man is distributed to space, hence mobility is

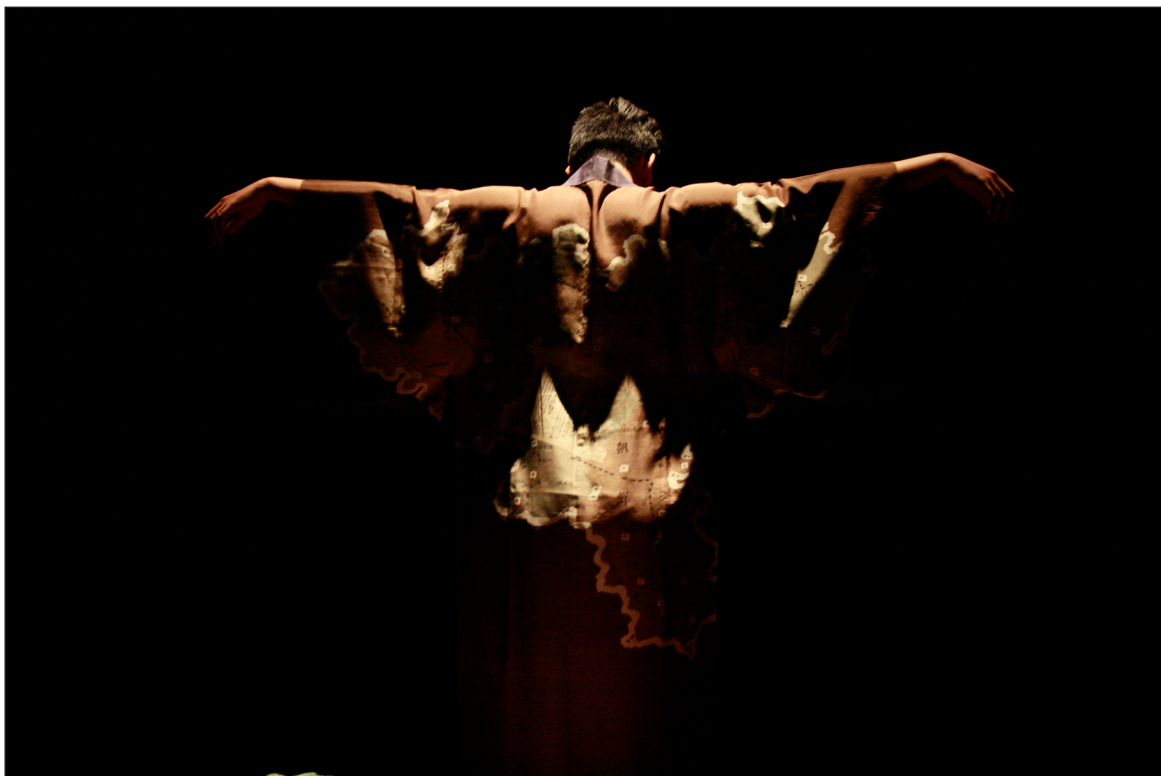**Figure 3:** Royce Ng in Japanese propaganda kimono. Credits: Lai Huihui.

Figure 4: Tobias Revell, *88.7, Stories From the First Transnational Traders*, lecture performance. Credits: Sun Siwei.

not the cause but the necessary symptom of transgression. As so many historical records reveal, negotiating the deserts and steppes meant consulting astronomical forces, the stars, the wind.

The opposite of the nomad figuration is the self-assured person who parcelizes spaces, nurtures land, builds cities, establishes laws, categorizes knowledge, draws borders, and so on and so forth – a whole history is to be written since the moment nature is detached from man.

If the nomad is defined by his being distributed by space, and not the other way around, how does he fit into a network? Deleuze and Guattari (1987) hold that the nomadic organization is numerical. The number here is to be understood not as the means of dividing space, but as itself emerging when something is distributed by space, as in the example of a pack of nomadic warriors: 'Number is no longer a means of counting or measuring but of moving: it is the number itself that moves through smooth space' (1987: 389). This image corresponds with a type of aggregate military diagram: swarming, an 'amorphous but coordinated way to strike from all directions' (Galloway and Thacker 2007: 67–68), to which order the horse-mounted

Figure 5: Star chart from Dunhuang, probably dating to c.700, showing a circular chart of the North Polar region. From the digitalized catalogue of International Dunhuang Project, catalogue entry: Or.8210/S.3326, licensed under CC0 1.0.

Figure 6: The ingenuity of underground waterway and irrigation system in dry lands spread all over Central Asia. Credits: Mi You.
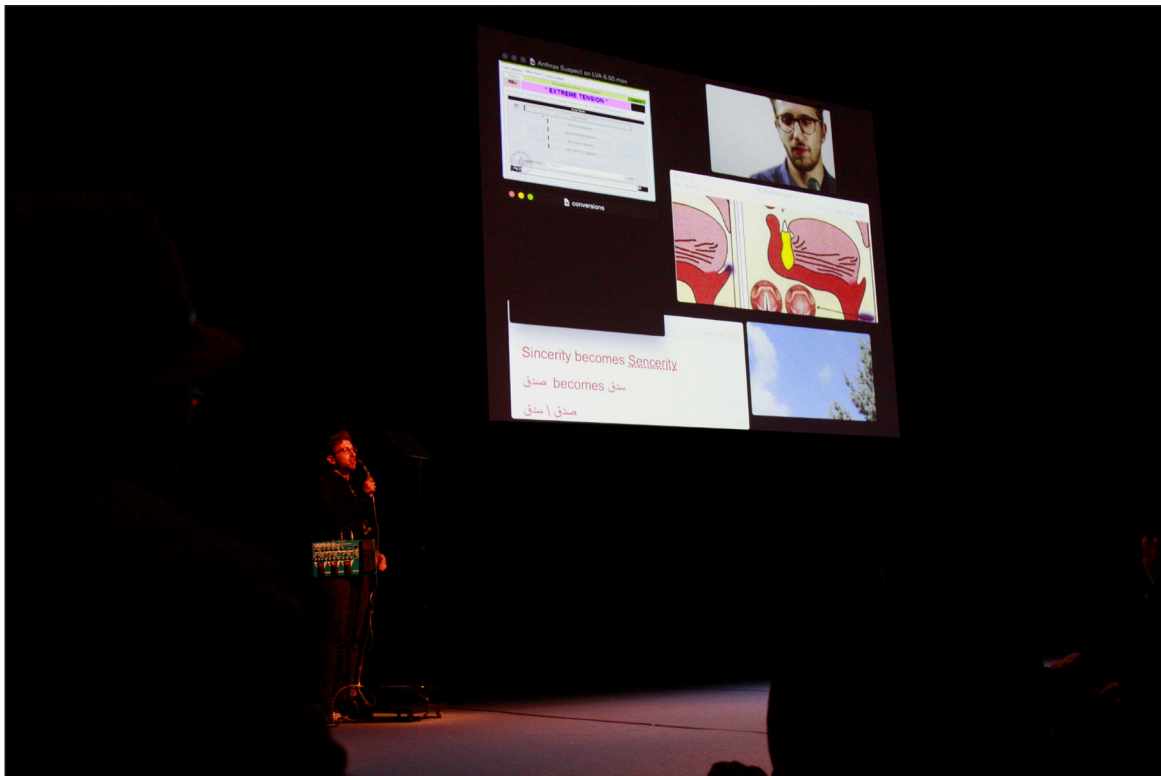

Figure 7: Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Contra Diction: Speech Against Itself,* performance. Credits: Sun Siwei.

Mongol warriors belong as an early example. It is this characteristic that defines the nomadic warriors as active agents in a network: each containing the whole but the sub total of all the parts do not make up a whole.

We have seen this form of nomadic organization in anti-establishment politics in the 1960s and 70s, whether in student movements or the more militant Communist kinds. If in history decentralization meant counter-power strategy, then since recent decades, this decentralized and swarming structure has been incorporated by the state to implement what Deleuze (1992) had since long anticipated as 'society of control'. No longer based on intuitional discipline, the society of control exercises control through continuous modulations from within.

The nomad, in an updated configuration, raises new challenges to the ubiquitous power matrix. A nomad has to evade accountability in the all-eyes, all-ears control society, as Agamben (1993: 86) notes, 'A being radically devoid of any representable identity would be absolutely irrelevant to the State.' In this sense, to defy the decentralized network of control, one has to stay within and become in excess of it, or in the words of Galloway and Thacker (2007: 98), to become 'hypertrophy': 'resistance implies a desire for stasis or retrograde motion, but hypertrophy is the desire for pushing beyond.'

In the program, the nomadic figuration is reinvigorated with such hypertrophic strategies.

Lawrence Abu Hamdan's performance *Contra Diction: Speech Against Itself* draws on *taqiyyah*, an old esoteric Shi'a Islamic jurisprudence practiced by the Druze Islamic minority, whereby 'a believing individual can deny his faith or commit otherwise illegal acts while they are at risk of persecution or in a condition of statelessness'. The artist analyzes instances involving language and speech acts in the Druze community, such as in the alleged mass conversion of a community through performing the orthodox way of praying, which the artist interprets as an act of *taqiyyah*. This hence reveals the paradoxical structure of language and pushes the boundaries of accountability in the politics of voice.

Turning to a different site, yet with similar hypertropic intensity, the program sheds light on the dark net. Ethical judgment aside, it is interesting to observe that a genuine decentralized network today is dubbed 'Dark Silk Road'; whether it's historical camaraderie or ironical wit that informs its name. Mohammad Salemy shares his ideas on the dark net – or the overt network of enciphered communication – that allows the trading of goods and services anonymously, and adopts bank-less monetary transactions using the bitcoin. Attempts to seize it and close down some of its hosts have not been successful; it revives and thrives elsewhere in the matrix of the internet. A parallel economy that escapes the capture of the corporate capitalistic machine, as it promises? Its long-term efficacy remains to be seen.

The Ultimate Space, the Ultimate Network

The somewhat dark nihilist tendency in some network theories is not coincidental, given the history of network organization in tandem with the acceleration of capitalism and the associated depletion of ecology. Galloway and Thacker (2007: 81) aim to extract the non-human within the human from network structures, meaning not just the physical hardware such as computers, but also pointing to the question of 'action, causality, and control' that networks effectuate. Benjamin Bratton (2015: 4) also describes what he calls the 'stack' as layers of technologies that make human political geography. The non-human aspect of the network should not invoke any animistic figuration manifesting its own desire and consciousness (an anthropomorphizing and therefore spatialized notion), but should be taken as a description of network-effectuated change in a generic way, encompassing both the human and non-human.

Network theorists appreciate Foucault's astute analysis of power formation in social practices yet point out the lack of accounting for 'the existence as such of power' (Galloway and Thacker 2007: 8). Blatantly simplifying, could we return to the time before humans and see the sheer manifestation of power as an expression of geological force, in the interest of achieving a generic view that puts power in society as such and power as a geological force on somewhat equal footing? In light of this, we might indeed find anything to be part of a non-human network.

Some 50 million years ago, the Indian Plate collided with the Eurasian landmass, causing the Tibetan plateau to stretch east- and westward, creating the largest mountain range on Earth, or the 'Roof of the World' as it is fondly dubbed – a spiral galaxy of massive peaks radiating clockwise into the Karakorum, Hindu Kush, Pamir, Kunlun and Himalayan mountain ranges. The thrusting force during, what is, in the eyes of geological time, a short time span, continues to push Mount Everest upwards today. If this is the way Earth prehends – to borrow a Whiteheadian term deriving from 'comprehend' for non-cognitive grasping – and continues to prehend the nonhuman network of forces and thrusts, in what form does humankind prehend it?

Figure 8: Lucie Tuma *Volkskörper #2: choreography of tectonics*, performance. Credits: Lai Huihui.

Figure 9: Lucie Tuma *Volkskörper #2: choreography of tectonics*, performance. Credits: Lai Huihui.

In other words, in what form is the geo-dynamism transformed into the human realm, if only registered pre-personally?

At the height of scientific explorations of Central Asia during the second half of the nineteenth century, when cartography serviced the military and designs of roads and railways met the interest of capitalists,

Figure 10: Lucie Tuma *Volkskörper #2: choreography of tectonics*, workshop. Credits: Lai Huihui.

French anarchist geographer Élisée Reclus (1830–1905) saw geology and geography being mined for geopolitical leverage. His writings resound today, as a new wave of high-speed railway projects is underway to connect Chinese and European commercial centers via Central Asia under the Chinese government's Silk Road Economic Belt program. Reclus's works retell the history of the humanities as part of the self-realization of planet earth. Hence his vision could be interpreted as a 'slower Silk Road'; indeed, he saw the Silk Road as 'a geohistorical marker not of maximized commodity flow but of humanity's collective self-awareness of "forming one body with the planet itself"' (Chin 2013: 218). Incidentally, Peter Kropotkin, the Russian founder of anarcho-communism who befriended Reclus and was influenced by him, was also a physical geographer before he turned a social geographer. Kropotkin's greatest contribution to geography was working out the main structural lines going through Central and Northern Asia. The fact that both anarchist geographers explored the parallel territories of geographical movements and social organization, lends impetus to the ultimate transgression project.

Reclus and the geological force field feature in the background of the last part of the program. Lucie Tuma's *Volkskörper #2: choreography of tectonics* performance and workshop explore the potential interplay of geological tectonics and the body. In the performance part, she dances minimal, serial movements timed to a geological formation of 35 million years in condensed duration on stage.

The walking workshop prepares the audience with perception technique to engage with tectonic movement as something that can be traced by scientific data yet escapes everyday experience.

As the program comes to an end and reflection dives into a historical space beyond the human, this performance aptly reminds the audience of what Deleuze (1990: 125) calls 'the primary order which grumbles beneath'.

Conclusion

The reflection on the silk road and the curation of the works as part of the 'Transgression, Syncretism' program aim to offer a methodology for rethinking real and invisible spaces. By extending the notion of space into networks, I have examined a matrix of roughly contoured historical spaces in relation to their place in networks.

This transhistorical construct does not endeavor to erase space and time but rather to recast them in the Bergsonian light of 'evolution' as mentioned in the epigraph to this article – intensive, non-abstract, and

hence offering possibilities for multiple connections. Seen through the lens of networks, space is no longer generic, distributable and pertaining to an abstract reality, but rather participates, co-determines and co-actualizes realities with overlaps of different times. In this sense, the historical network of silk road trade and the dark net today, the swarming tactic of the historical nomads and the hypertrophy of language today can be revisited and intercontextualized. Moreover, the network methodology emphasizes the shifts and mutations in networks, so from the historical trade practices along the silk road to railroad projects in the last century, from Western colonial expansion to East Asian adaptation of the capitalistic world order, from decentralized counter-politics to decentralized control, all testify to the urgency of situated analysis without lapsing into totalizing concepts. Having drawn the line of flight through these heterogeneous spaces, that is, the implication of power in networks as a shared legacy, albeit taking different forms, I have attempted to establish the nomadic figuration as a counter strategy, one that is not based on the radically other of what we know or on simply negating what we know, but one that ultimately stays within the network and leads it to its hypertrophy.

Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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